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ABSTRACT

Placement testing programs are generally designed to place students into courses for which they are best prepared, to reduce administrative costs due to students dropping and adding courses because of poor placement decisions, and to provide faculty with information concerning students' levels of preparation well in advance of the first day of classes. The objectives of such programs are to provide students with an easily accessible place to take their placement tests, to reduce the amount of retesting needed if students transfer between university campuses, and to provide faculty with advance information concerning students' selection and levels of preparation. Development of the tests must follow a well-defined set of procedures. First, a set of objectives must be identified, and a sampling included on any one form of the test and test questions constructed to measure them. After editing, a pilot test is run and, if necessary, questions are revised or replaced and a pilot test is run again. The final version of the test is then prepared, and a description of the test and how it is intended to be used is distributed to high school and university faculty in speech and communication arts. The monitoring is done by studying the test items after each administration to see that they continue to function as expected. New items and new test forms should be developed to prevent the test from losing its effectiveness and to enable it to respond to course content change. (EL)

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Developing and Administering A State-Wide Speech Placement Testing Program

Abstract
Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the
Speech Communication Association
Denver, Colorado

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DATE: November 8, 1985

Purpose of Placement Testing Programs

Placement testing programs are generally designed to (1) place students into courses for which they are best prepared; (2) reduce administrative costs due to students dropping and adding courses because of poor placement decisions; and (3) provide faculty with information concerning students' levels of preparation well in advance of the first day of classes.

Objectives of the UW-System Placement Testing Program

(1) To provide students with an easily accessible place to take their placement tests. (2) To reduce the amount of re-testing needed if students transfer between UW-System campuses. (3) To provide System faculty with advance information concerning students' selection and levels of preparation.

Developing Placement Tests for the UW-System Placement Testing Program

Development of placement tests must follow a well-defined set of procedures: (1) A set of objectives must be identified. (2) A sampling of these objectives included on any one form of the test and test questions constructed to measure them. (3) Following editorial, pilot testing is done. (4) If necessary, revisions or replacement of questions are made and the questions again pilot tested. (5) A final version of the test is prepared for use. (6) Finally, a description of the test and how it is intended to be used is distributed to high school and university faculty in speech and communication arts.

Monitoring the Testing Program

Items on the test need to be studied after each administration to see that they continue to function as expected. New items and new test forms need to be developed to prevent the test from losing its effectiveness and to remain responsive to changes in course content.

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Allan S. Cohen
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Developing and Administering A State-Wide Speech Placement Testing Program

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Introduction

Placement testing programs are generally designed to do three things: (1) place students into courses for which they are best prepared; (2) reduce administrative costs due to students dropping and adding courses because of poor placement decisions; and, (3) provide faculty with information concerning students' levels of preparation, well in advance of the first day of classes.

Place students into courses for which they are best prepared

Placement in a course is premised on the assumption that the student is ready to learn in that course. Students who are properly placed in a course, it is assumed, will generally be more prepared to learn the material presented in that course. Conversely, students who do not have the pre-requisite knowledge for a course will tend to do less well at learning the material in the course than will students who do have that knowledge.

From a student's perspective, it is far more desireable to be placed into a course for which one is prepared than it is to be in a course for which one is either over- or under-prepared. If the learning demands of the course do not match the student's level of preparation, the student is either likely to be bored (due to being over-prepared) or frustrated and possibly somewhat anxious (from being under-prepared).

Teachers also have an interest in trying to be certain that students will be able to learn from the instruction provided. It is not pleasant or easy to teach students who are either bored or frustrated because their preparation does not match the pre-requisite level of knowledge of the course. This concern for the student's own welfare is reflected in an effort to see that the instruction is geared to the appropriate level of preparation. Such a fit can be best maximized by proper placement.

In addition, the teaching job is easier if students are

faculty can be assured that students in a given class are adequately prepared for the material to be presented. When students are at about the same level of preparation for a course, the instructor needs to spend far less time dealing with bringing students up to level or at challenging advanced students while the rest catch-up.

Reduce administrative costs that are due to students changing courses in order to find the one or ones which better match their levels of preparation.

Proper placement of students also results in fewer administrative problems associated with students dropping or adding courses. Administrative costs due to poorly placed students switching, dropping and/or adding courses are minimized if students are initially placed properly. If students are properly placed, it is less likely that they will try to drop one course add another. Such student searching for proper placement oftentimes saddles the university administration with additional costs that detract from the primary instructional mission of the university. Having a well-designed placement testing program in operation can dramatically reduce this kind of student course turnover.

To provide faculty with information concerning course loads well in advance of the first day of classes.

Faculty given enough advance knowledge of the level of preparation of students in their courses will be able to adjust the instruction upward or downward and to prepare appropriate instructional materials to meet the students' needs. In addition, departments, given adequate information, will be able to efficiently allocate scarce instructional resources to provide students with the best instruction possible. When preparation time is adequate, the student benefits and the university maximizes the effectiveness of its resources in bringing instruction to the student. If, on the other hand, there is little time to prepare or to allocate resources, students will suffer and inefficient use of available instrucitonal resources will occur.

OBJECTIVES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM PLACEMENT TESTING PROGRAM

To provide students with an easily accessible place to take their placement tests

Students attending one of the campuses of the UW-System usually leave home in the fall and move to the city in which the campus is located. UW-System Placement tests, however, are given in the spring and summer at campuses around the State, preceeding initial matriculation. The System-wide placement testing program enables students to take their

meaning that usually students can take their placement tests without traveling long distances to do so. The intent of the program is to make it easier for students to take the placement tests, whenever possible, than might be the case were they to have to travel to their campuses of intended matriculation.

<u>To reduce the amount of re-testing needed if and when students transfer between UW-System campuses.</u>

Transfer of students between System campuses is a wide-spread occurrence; one which normally causes few problems. In spite of the fact that the UW-System campuses are independent institutions, in most students' minds, there is apparently little difference between campuses or, at least, no reasons to assume there might be some problems arising from transfering from one to another. Difficulties do not often arise, (aside from possible credit loss), except in the situation in which a student may not have yet taken a course for which a placement test is required. At that point, it is often the case that that student may have to re-take the same placement test s/he had already taken. Through the UW-System-wide placement testing program, participating campuses are relieved from the need to re-test a significant number of their students. Furthermore, those students do not waste time in needless re-taking of placement tests.

Instead, to facilitate this transfering between campuses, a computerized listing of the scores of all students who took the placement tests is provided to each of the participating campuses. Campus testing offices can simply look up the scores of transfer students without having to re-test these students. These lists of scores are updated throughout the year whenever scores from newly entered students are added. In this way, individual campuses in the System can keep continually informed of the placement testing status of their students as well as of potential transfer students from within the UW-System.

<u>To Provide UW-System Faculty with Advance Information Regarding Enrollment Requests in Introductory Departmental Courses.</u>

The results of students' placement tests are provided to participating campuses early in the summer. With this information, academic departments can plan their course assignments making adjustments in course loads and assignments well in advance of the beginning of classes in the fall. Faculty are given notice by their departments of any course changes or shifts in the incoming student populations so that course notes and syllabi can also be changed before the term

placement tests during the summer or early in the fall, the information based on estimates from the System-wide testing program normally provide reasonably accurate data to estimate fall course sizes.

DEVELOPING PLACEMENT TESTS FOR THE SYSTEM PLACEMENT TESTING PROGRAM

Development of placement tests, like that of any other kind of test, must follow a well-defined set of proceduresdesigned to ensurre both accuracy and fairness in assigning students to their appropriate places in a course or sequence of courses .

Test Objectives. Placement tests must have a set of objectives that are to be measured. Without the statement of objectives, there is really no way to be sure that the test questions adequately cover the material to be tested. These objectives provide the starting point for the development of the placement test. The objectives also provide the mechanism by which the test can be evaluated for use by the individual System campuses.

Since it was clear that objectives were critical to the development of a placement test, the campuses in the UW-System formed a Speech Placement Test Development Committee to put together a set of criteria from which the objectives for the placement test could then be developed. The final set of objectives will be published by the Committee prior to the test being used on any campuses. This set of objectives will represent a consensus by the members of the committee as to commonalities in introductory courses in speech and communication on the various System campuses.

NOTE: It should be noted that these commonalities are based on entry level knowledge required of students in order to learn the materials presented in the course. This is entry level knowledge, not necessarily exit level knowledge from a previous course. Furthermore, there is not necessarily a direct or simple relationship between the information a student needs to know to be ready to learn in a course and the information a student is expected to have at the end of that course.

Writing the Test Questions. Given the preliminary list of objectives developed by the Committee, it was clear that it would not be possible to measure each one exhaustively on a single test, at least, not in a reasonable testing time. Instead, only a sampling of these objectives have been included on any one form of the test. Once the set of objectives was determined, test questions were then constructed, hopefully to measure those objectives.

In any testing program, development of test items

are not ambiguous or tricky. If questions are ambiguous, tricky, or poorly stated, they may not function properly as part of the whole test. The questions must also be free of biased language or concepts which would tend to detract from their utility in a placement test. The questions should also not represent contrived situations. They should refer to real ones, not ones which occur only because a certain concept had to be included on the test. Finally, the test itself should be free of anything that would permit the mechanics of taking the test to interfere with answering the questions. All of these things identify questions which are not well-written. Such questions almost always detract from the overall purpose of a test, which is to measure as accurately and precisely as possible the content area identified by the test objectives. We should try not to trick students with the test, rather we should try to measure them as fairly and realistically as possible.

Pilot Testing. The test questions then need to be pilot tested, i.e., given to students to see if the questions function as they were intended. This is an important part of the test development process. The speech test questions were pilot tested on classes of UW students enrolled in introductory speech and communication courses at several campuses around the System. By trying out the test questions on students in these courses, we were able to get responses from students who were as nearly like the students that would take the eventual placement tests as we could find. Short of administering the pilot versions of the placement in actual placement testing situations, this is about as close as one is likely to get to our target population of potential examinees.

Revising and Re-Pilot Testing. Revisions or replacement of questions then need to be made after the pilot testing, and the questions again tried out to see if they work, or at least work better. The results of the tryout need to be examined closely to determine whether students were confused by any wording, etc. used on the test. Whenever this is discovered, these questions either need to be re-written or replaced. If it is found, for example, that students with less overall knowledge answer a question correctly more often than students with more knowledge, the question has to be closely examined. Oftentimes this sort of thing occurs when the incorrect answer key is inadvertently used. If this is not the case, the question should then be re-written and re-piloted until it performs as it should given the context of the total test.

Final Test Assembly. When enough questions pass the rigorous criteria for inclusion in a placement test and, when it is felt that adequate coverage of important objectives is provided by the questions that have been accepted, a final version of the full set of test questions can be prepared for administration. At the present time, we are awaiting the campus by campus testing of the first form of the Speech

IMPLEMENTING THE PROGRAM

What does the same test score mean for different campuses?

All students attending participating UW campuses take the same tests. Once the scores are returned to the individual campuses, they need to be interpreted in terms of course placement decisions. Since each campus has a slightly different course sequence into which students will be placed, the cut-off scores used for placement on one campus may not apply to any other campus. It is necessary, therefore, to work individually with the faculty on each participating campus to develop a set of interpretation guidelines for using the speech placement tests.

Working with individual System campuses to establish campus placement decisions.

The first step in the process is to administer the new placement test on the individual campus to students who have just been placed into the relevant courses. However, it is important that these new placement tests not have been used for placement into any of these courses. The intent of this exercise is to determine how well these students, i.e., those placed into the courses based on the old placement criteria, do on the soon-to-be-installed placement tests.

In this way, it is possible to estimate a relationship between the old placement criteria (i.e., the ones used to place students into these courses before the new placement was used) and the new placement criteria (i.e., the criteria that include the score on the new placement tests.) This relationship is developed for each campus individually; it is never done for the UW-System as a whole. This means that there are no System-wide placement cut-off scores. Such scores would probably have no relationship to courses on any campus and, therefore, in all likelihood, would be meaningless.

NOTE: It is important to recognize that the new placement tests do not provide the sole set of information used to make placement decisions. At lease, this is the case for most of the UW campuses. Basing placement decisions on a single score, without taking into consideration other factors such as high school background, previous educational experiences, etc., would be, at best, a risky business.

MONITORING THE PLACEMENT TESTING PROGRAM

Function of Current Test Form(s)

Item analyses across all campuses need to be continually studies to determine whether/not the items on the test still contribute to the overall purpose for which the test was constructed. If items fail to function, they need to be either revised or replaced, just as was the case during the pilot testing phase of test development.

New Forms Need to be Continually Developed

It is important that the first form of the speech placement test not also be the last. Test development work for a placement testing program is not a one-time thing. After the first form of the placement test is developed, the work on monitoring the effectiveness of the first form and also development of subsequent forms needs to begin.

The development of new forms to replace old ones is important for a number of reasons. The major one being that the security of a form is compromised whenever that form is used. In order for placement tests to be effective tools in the placement process, students cannot have access to them prior to the administration date. Once the test has been administered, the questions have been seen by all who took it. Those persons tell their friends, albeit rarely with any malicious intent, and the security of the form is compromised. As often as possible, therefore, the performance of the test items needs to be studies. Items should be routinely replaced before they lose their usefulness and new items inserted.

Security and Testing for Credit and/or Exemption

Some campuses are planning to use these placement tests to either provide students with exemption from required courses or actual course credit. The net effect of this approach will be to make test security more difficult to maintain than were we just dealing with a placement test. This is because placement test questions, while attractive to students before the test is given, do not generally have value outside of their use in the placement process. However, when test questions can provide actual credit or exemption from required coursework, the value of foreknowledge of these questions rises considerably. Consciously or not, students will remember these questions and tell their friends, thereby ruining the questions for either placement or credit determination. The net result is that, if the test is to continue to function properly for those campuses across the System, who want to use it, the test questions have to be replaced at a faster pace than would be the case were we

Course Content Changes

Another reason for developing new forms of the placement test is that course content changes, and consequently, so do course entrance requirements. As new information is added to the base of knowledge in an area, courses change. No area of scholarly inquiry is static for even a short period of time. While changes in course content should not dictate changes in the level of difficulty of the test, it is important that the members of the placement test development committee stay continually aware of shifting trends in their areas of expertise and also how these trends affect course content on their individual campuses.

For a testing program to remain useful, it must be continually monitored and updated. As soon as this monitoring ceases, the program begins to decline in usefulness with respect to the placement decision process.